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ABSTRACT

In the field of education, there is considerable controversy about the appropriateness of an inclusive setting as a more beneficial environment than a resource room for students with learning disabilities. The purpose of this research is to determine whether students with learning disabilities perform better in an inclusive setting or in a resource room setting. The research consisted of a 12-week study of reading instruction for five students diagnosed with learning disabilities. For the first 6 weeks, the students received reading instruction in a resource room. For the remainder of the time, the students received reading instruction in an inclusive setting. The academic achievements of these students in the two settings were compared. Results show that academically as well as behaviorally, all students performed better in an inclusive setting. (Contains 22 references.) (Author/SM)

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Does an Inclusive Setting Affect Reading Comprehension in Students with Learning Disabilities?

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Mid-South Educational Research Association
November 6, 2003

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ABSTRACT
IRIS MARIE THIERRY
Does an Inclusive Setting Affect Reading
Comprehension in Students with Learning Disabilities?
(Under the direction of Donna Power)

In the field of education, there is considerable controversy about the appropriateness of an inclusive setting as a more beneficial environment than a resource room for students with learning disabilities. The purpose of this research is to determine whether students with learning disabilities perform better in an inclusive setting or in a resource room setting. The research consisted of a twelve week study of reading instruction for five students diagnosed with learning disabilities. For the first six weeks, the students received reading instruction in a resource room. For the remainder of the time, the students received reading instruction in an inclusive setting. Literature Circles were the grouping method of choice. The academic achievements of these students in the two settings were compared. Results show that academically, as well as behaviorally, all students performed better in an inclusive setting.

HYPOTHESIS

The level of success for students with reading disabilities in an inclusive setting will be dependent on the extent of their reading deficiency. Those students who have deficiencies of less than two grade levels will be successful in an inclusive setting. These students will benefit from peers who are good readers and exhibit an increase in self-esteem.

On the other hand, those students with reading disabilities who are approximately two or more grade levels behind their peers will suffer in an inclusive setting. These students need more remediation in a resource room in order to lessen their deficiencies before reintegration.

In addition, all reintegrated students will show improvements in other subject areas due to their constant presence in the general education classroom. It is common for students with special needs in pullout programs to suffer from declining grades in other subjects due to absence from the general education classroom during instructional times.

METHODS

A fourth grade inclusion class was chosen for the research. The school was in a low to middle class rural community. About 65% of the students were from financially at risk families. This fourth grade class consisted of seventeen students (N=17). About 18% of the students were African-Americans. The other 82% were Caucasian. Only 35% of the students were males, while the other 65% were females. Five of the students have been identified as learning disabled. Of these five students, 60% were males, while the other 40% were females. All of the students with learning disabilities were Caucasian. These five students had participated in reading instruction in a resource room for the first semester of the 2001/2002 school year. During this time, the students were given instruction by a special education instructor at their school. The students were instructed in an inclusive classroom by a general education fourth grade teacher for the remainder of the day.

In October of 2001, I surveyed each of the seventeen students individually (see Appendix A). Each survey was conducted in an oral interview format. I read the questions to each student and then wrote down each response verbatim. The student survey focused on the students' preferences for reading instruction (individual, small group, whole class, etc.). The student survey also included questions relative to students'

views on inclusion. The purpose of the student survey was to acquire ideas for teaching strategies.

Also, in October of 2001, I surveyed a large sample of general education teachers, special education teachers, and administrators in the school (see Appendix B). I placed 63 surveys in the boxes of teachers and administrators. The teacher/administrator survey consisted of true/false questions as well as a number of free response questions. The participants were given one month to complete the survey forms and return them to me in the office. The teacher/administrator survey focused on teaching methods and attitudes about inclusion. The purpose of the teacher survey was to acquire ideas for making inclusion successful.

Before any actual experimentation could take place, initial reading levels were determined for each of the seventeen students. Three tests were administered to each student (two formal tests and one informal test). The STAR Test was administered in September of 2001. The STAR Test is a computerized reading test designed for compatibility with the Accelerated Reader Program. The TORC was administered in November of 2001. The TORC is a standardized test of reading comprehension. Students must read short passages and then answer multiple choice questions about each passage. Most of the questions are on interpretive and critical levels of comprehension, rather than on a literal level. The IRI was administered in November of 2001. The IRI is an informal test of reading comprehension. It is an oral reading test in which the student reads teacher-made, graded passages aloud. Afterwards, the student orally answers questions about the passage while the teacher records the student's responses.

Several steps were involved in forming the IRI's used in this research. First, single copies of trade books from various reading levels were obtained from the school library. The reading level of each book was supplied by the publisher. One book was chosen for each grade level from grade one to grade six. From each book, one passage (of about 150 to 200 words) was chosen. Seven questions were formulated to test the comprehension of each passage (see Appendix C). In an effort to evaluate the various cognitive abilities of the students, Bloom's Taxonomy levels were applied to each question. The grade equivalent scores from the IRI, the STAR, and the TORC were averaged to determine the initial reading level for each student (see Table 1).

After initial reading levels were determined, the actual experimentation began. The research consisted of a twelve-week study that was further divided into two equal six-week periods. The first six-week period began on January 7, 2002. During this first period of research, the five students with learning disabilities continued to attend reading class in a resource room. I instructed these students in reading during this time. Meanwhile, I also instructed the remaining twelve students in reading in the regular classroom during another part of the day. Both groups of students were taught using the same instructional method as well as the same activities in order to insure consistency.

Literature Circles were used as the instructional strategy for both groups of students. Literature Circles are academically heterogeneous reading groups. Students were given a choice of literature to read. Students who chose the same literature to read were grouped together. Within the reading groups, students had the freedom to read

silently or aloud with a partner (buddy reading). Each group met regularly with the teacher for discussion and activities.

Trade books were used in place of the school's basal readers. In addition, both groups of students were assigned the same types of activities with each trade book that they read. Activities chosen for each book included a Venn diagram (see Appendix D), a prediction or evaluation writing activity (Bloom's Taxonomy), an art activity, a story map (see Appendix D), and a written test (see Appendix E). At the end of the first six-week period, all students were given IRI's again in order to determine whether their grade equivalent scores were affected during this period of reading instruction and also to determine a midpoint reading level for each student.

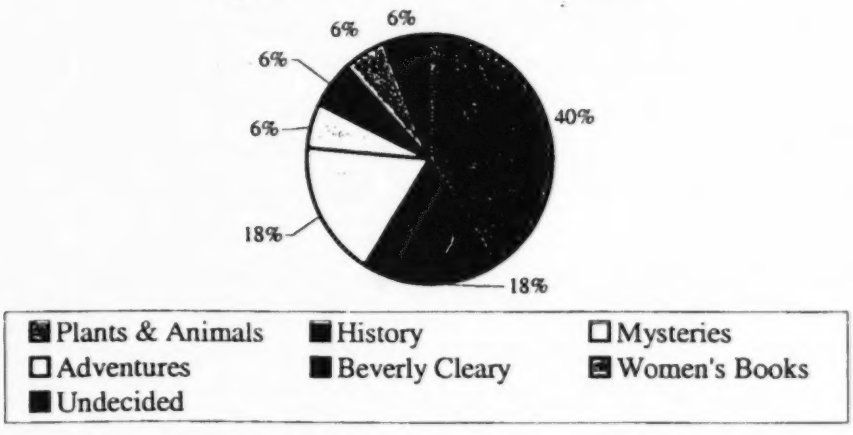
The second six-week period began on February 18, 2002. During this period, the five students with disabilities were reintegrated into the general education classroom with their classmates. I then instructed all seventeen students, still using Literature Circles, trade books, and the five previously mentioned activities. At the end of the second six-week period, all students were given IRI's once again in order to determine whether their grade equivalent scores were affected during the second period of reading instruction and also to determine a final reading level for each student (see Figure 10).

RESULTS

Student Survey Results

The results for most of the questions (see Appendix A) from the student survey are shown below in the form of pie graphs. When asked what topics they like to read about, surprisingly, the greatest percentage (40%) of the students said that they like to read nonfiction books about plants, animals, and bugs (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Topics of Interest



Question two was a multiple choice question about the types of media that the students like to read. The choices given were newspapers, books, and magazines. Many (70%) of the students responded in favor of books (see Figure 2 on the next page).

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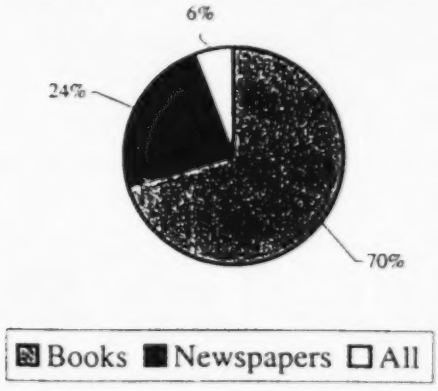
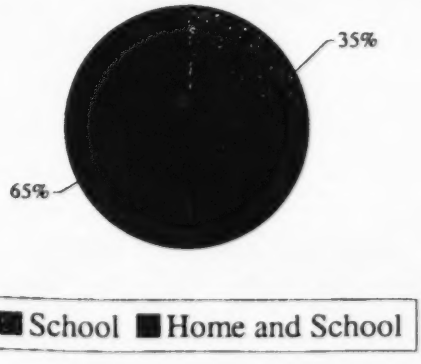
Figure 2: Preferred Media



Question three asked about the preferred reading environment of the students. Students chose whether they liked to read at home, at school, or both. The majority (65%) of the students proclaimed that they prefer to read both at home as well as at school. None of the students said that they preferred to read only at home (see Figure 3 below).

Figure 3: Preferred Reading Environments



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Questions four and six dealt with personal reading preferences. In question four, students were asked to decide whether they like to read alone, in pairs, or in small groups. The largest percentage (40%) of the students preferred to read in small groups (see Figure 4 below). In question six, students were asked if they prefer to read silently, aloud, or have someone read aloud to them. The majority (58%) of the students preferred to read silently (see Figure 5 below).

Figure 4: Setting

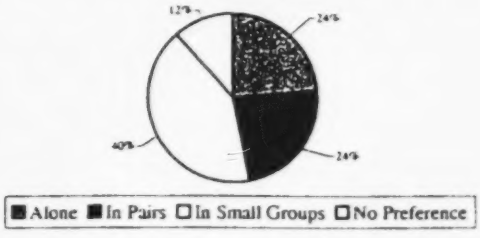
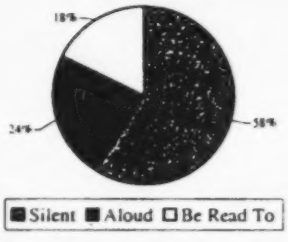
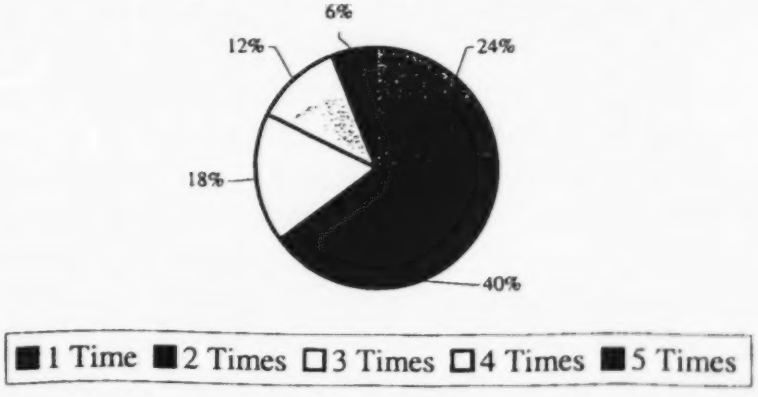


Figure 5: Style



Question seven asked how many times the student needs to read a story before he/she feels confident that the story has been comprehended. This question was a free response question. Many of the students (40%) claimed that they only need to read a story twice in order to understand it (see Figure 6 below).

Figure 6: Quantity of Readings



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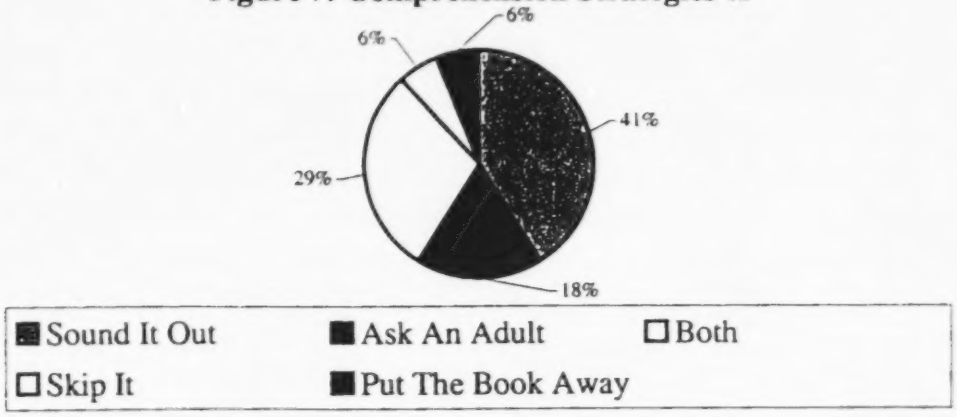
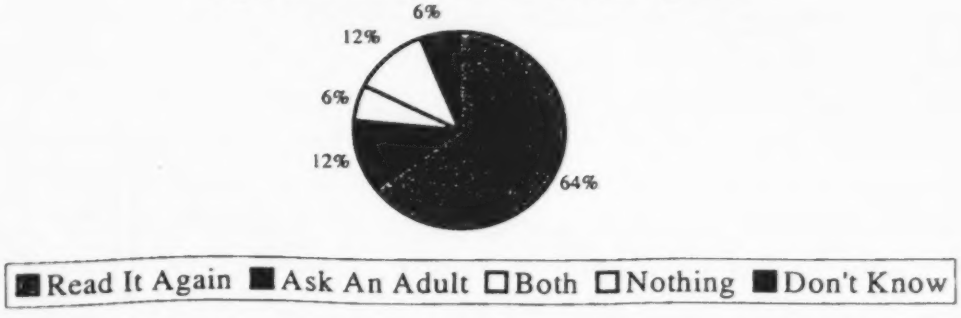
Questions ten and eleven dealt with the student's comprehension strategies. In question ten, students were asked to tell what they do when they are reading and come upon a word that they do not know. The largest percentage of the students (41%) admit that they only sound the word out (see Figure 7 below).

Figure 7: Comprehension Strategies-A



In question eleven, the students were asked what they do if they are reading and do not understand the passage that they have just completed. The majority of the students (64%) said that they would automatically go back and read the passage again (see Figure 8 below).

Figure 8: Comprehension Strategies-B



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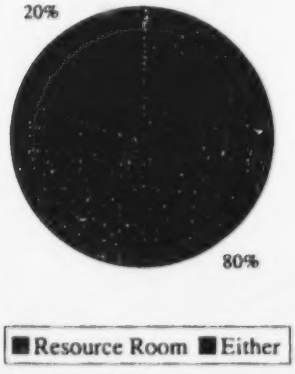
Question twelve was asked only to the five students with special needs who usually attend reading class in a resource room. The students were asked whether they prefer to go to the resource room or stay with the rest of their classmates. The majority of the students (80%) said that they would rather attend class in the resource room (see Figure 9 below). When asked why they would rather go to the resource room, one student responded, "Because sometimes it's just four or five people in there and I can read easier."

Figure 9: Classroom Preferences



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Research Results

Before implementation of the reading program, an initial reading level was determined for each student. In order to determine initial reading levels, grade equivalent scores from the three aforementioned tests (two formal and one informal) were averaged for each student. Students A* through E* are the five students with learning disabilities participating in the study. Also, the grades listed under the category titled IRI below represent the instructional reading levels from that test. The initial reading levels for each student are shown below in Table 1.

Table 1: Initial Reading Levels

Student	STAR	TORC	IRI	Average
A*	4.8	5.7	5.5	5.3
B*	1.7	1.5	5.0	2.7
C*	5.2	2.7	3.0	3.6
D*	3.5	4.2	1.5	3.1
E*	2.4	1.2	5.0	2.9
F	3.6	4.8	5.0	4.5
G	4.6	2.7	4.0	3.8
H	3.5	5.7	6.0	5.1
I	5.4	3.5	6.0	5.0
J	2.8	3.5	3.0	3.1
K	3.4	5.1	6.0	4.8
L	5.3	3.1	6.0	4.8
M	4.4	3.5	5.5	4.5
N	4.5	8.0	6.0	6.2
O	2.5	3.1	3.5	3.0
P	4.7	6.2	5.5	5.5
Q	3.2	3.5	4.5	3.7

During both the sixth week and the twelfth week, each student was given another IRI (informal) examination. During the sixth week examination, the teacher-made IRI's (see Appendix C) were used. During the twelfth week examination, the IRI's were acquired from a book entitled Qualitative Reading Inventory—3 (Leslie & Caldwell, 2001). The comparison of the initial (first week), midpoint (sixth week), and final (twelfth week) reading levels are displayed below in Table 2.

Table 2: Initial/Midpoint/Final Reading Level Comparison

Student	Initial	Midpoint	Final
A*	5.3	5.5	6.0
B*	2.7	4.5	1.5
C*	3.6	4.0	3.0
D*	3.1	4.0	1.0
E*	2.9	3.5	1.0
F	4.5	5.0	3.5
G	3.8	4.0	4.0
H	6.2	6.0	5.5
I	5.1	6.0	5.0
J	5.0	5.5	9.5
K	3.1	4.0	2.5
L	4.8	6.0	4.0
M	4.8	6.0	5.5
N	4.5	6.0	5.5
O	3.0	3.5	3.0
P	5.5	5.5	5.0
Q	3.7	5.5	4.5

In addition to tracking the changes in IRI scores, I also tracked the changes in reading class work scores for each student throughout the twelve week period. Scores were tracked for four of the activities: the Venn diagram, the writing activity, the story map, and the final test (teacher-made). Each student has four scores for each activity because each student read four books during this twelve week period. Books one and two were read during the first six weeks of the research, while books three and four were read in the inclusive segment of the research (the last six weeks). The scores appearing in each of these tables were scaled in order to take into account the level of the book that the student was reading. In order to calculate the scaled score for each assignment, the child's raw score (out of one hundred possible points) was multiplied by the reading level of the book. Also, there is a line graph for each reading activity to represent class averages on that assignment. On each line graph, the pink line represents the averages for the general education students while the blue line represents the averages for the students with learning disabilities. While calculating the averages, any zeros on assignments (due to absences) were omitted.

Table 3: Venn Diagram Scaled Scores				
	Resource Room		Inclusion	
Student	Book 1	Book 2	Book 3	Book 4
A*	200	200	0	420
B*	200	300	400	390
C*	180	300	380	255
D*	200	200	250	420
E*	200	300	270	600
F	288	380	400	300
G	480	400	400	300
H	490	285	300	540
I	380	475	340	588
J	300	380	500	600
K	470	255	400	600
L	300	360	270	480
M	450	285	380	600
N	400	255	475	600
O	300	60	40	540
P	300	450	400	480
Q	388	270	400	588

Figure 10: Venn Diagram Averages

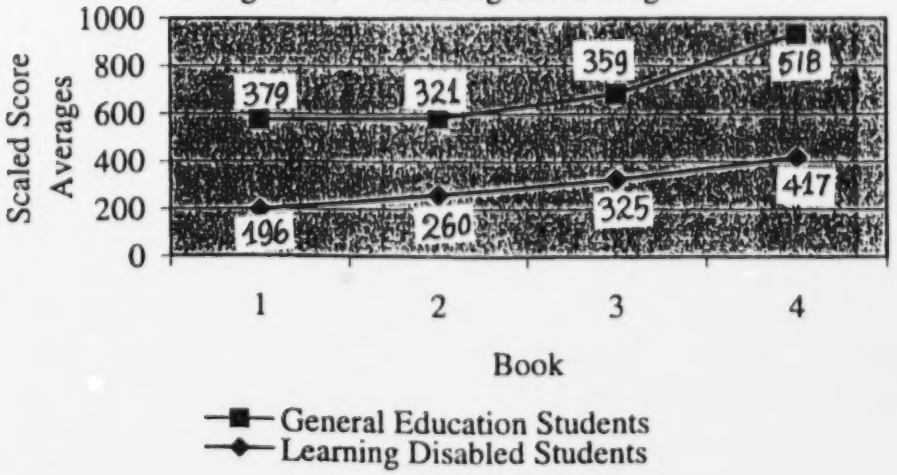

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Table 4: Writing Activity Scaled Scores				
	Resource Room		Inclusion	
Student	Book 1	Book 2	Book 3	Book 4
A*	184	180	450	600
B*	184	288	0	600
C*	188	0	372	300
D*	170	140	475	0
E*	194	294	285	0
F	270	360	364	300
G	495	392	392	0
H	490	285	0	0
I	392	435	380	600
J	285	396	500	300
K	500	285	396	237
L	270	348	294	600
M	500	210	392	300
N	376	210	475	300
O	240	180	0	600
P	270	410	320	600
Q	376	294	380	600

Figure 11: Writing Activity Averages

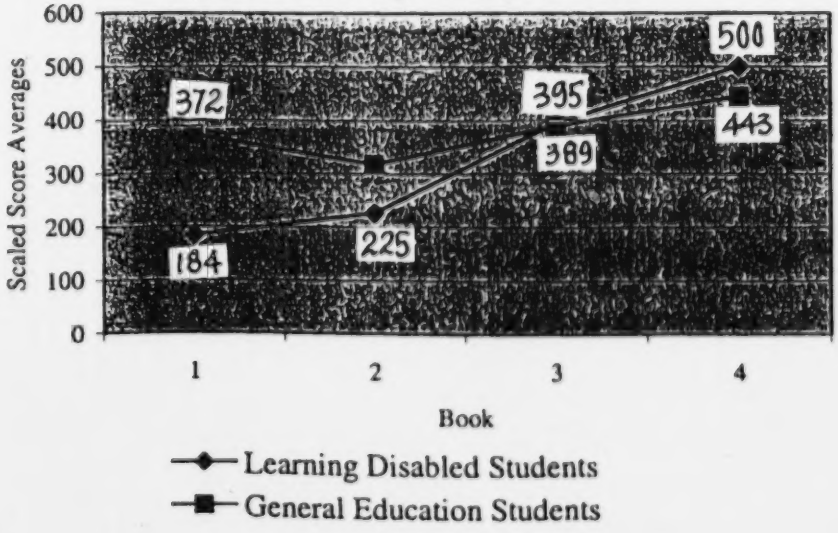

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Table 5: Story Map Scaled Scores				
	Resource Room		Inclusion	
Student	Book 1	Book 2	Book 3	Book 4
A*	194	180	475	522
B*	196	270	380	540
C*	194	300	400	300
D*	198	190	395	480
E*	196	225	300	588
F	279	380	400	300
G	500	400	392	450
H	490	300	388	570
I	380	495	392	570
J	279	392	450	285
K	500	225	400	300
L	285	340	300	0
M	450	255	400	225
N	388	294	475	300
O	255	261	360	462
P	288	500	392	600
Q	392	300	396	576

Figure 12: Story Map Averages

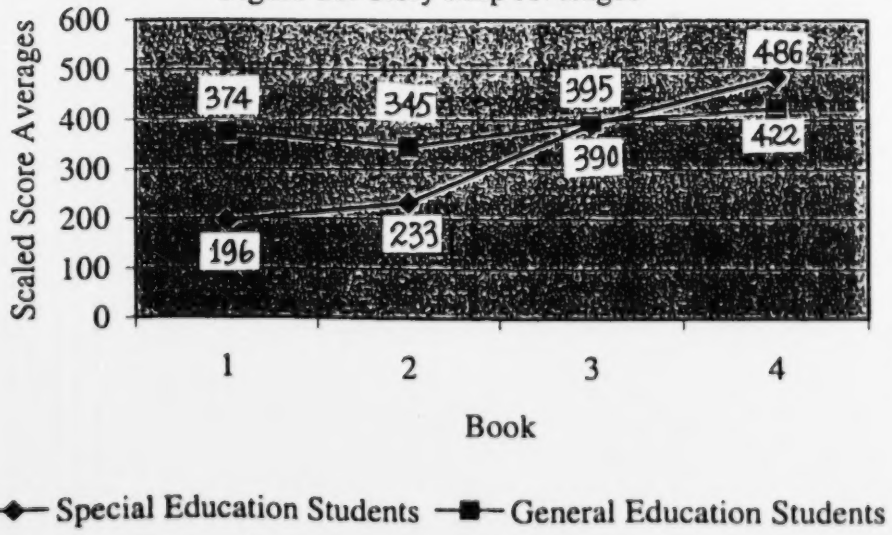

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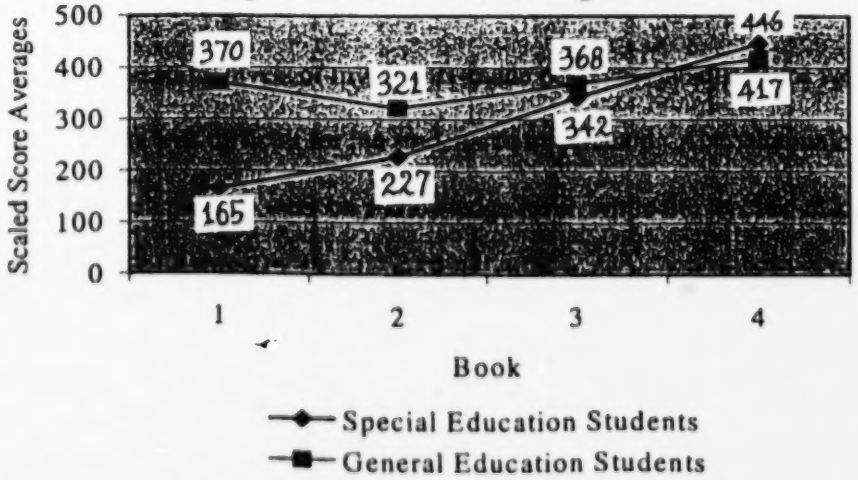
Table 6: Final Test Scaled Scores				
	Resource Room		Inclusion	
Student	Book 1	Book 2	Book 3	Book 4
A*	200	200	450	468
B*	180	264	344	552
C*	176	282	316	264
D*	116	138	320	396
E*	152	252	279	552
F	282	400	356	264
G	500	376	272	468
H	455	282	400	504
I	400	500	376	504
J	300	400	500	300
K	490	189	332	276
L	252	352	186	504
M	445	240	400	300
N	400	201	500	300
O	270	165	344	564
P	264	460	368	528
Q	376	282	380	492

Figure 13: Final Test Averages



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CONCLUSION

The results of the research only partially concurred with my hypothesis. According to the Initial/Midpoint/Final Reading Level Comparison (see Table 2), only Students A, B, and E complied with my hypothesis. Because Student A was not initially two or more grade levels behind his classmates, he was very successful in an inclusive setting. Students B and E were initially two or more grade levels behind their peers. In conjunction with my hypothesis, these two students showed a decrease in performance while in an inclusive setting according to their IRI scores (Table 2). On the other hand, Students C and D were not initially two or more grade levels behind; however, according to their IRI scores (Table 2), their performance decreased in an inclusive setting.

Table 2 shows that most of the students in the class (fourteen) showed a decrease on the Final Reading Level IRI. Recall that these IRI's were acquired from a book instead of being teacher-made. I have found that, while the passages from this book were compliant with the reading levels of my teacher-made passages, the questions were worded in a way that was difficult for the students to understand. Also, the majority of the questions for each passage were on a knowledge level, while the teacher-made tests consisted of a variety of Bloom's Levels, most of which were higher cognitive levels of reading comprehension.

Conversely, the class work and teacher-made test grades conflict with both the IRI scores as well as the hypothesis. All students (general education students as well as students with special needs) showed an increase in performance while in an inclusive setting. In fact, not only did the students with special needs perform well in the inclusive setting, but they also surpassed the scores of the general education students. Also, the students with special needs chose to read more difficult trade books while in the inclusive setting. One qualitative issue was the behavior of the students. The behavior of the students with special needs improved greatly in the inclusive setting. Surprisingly, there was no difference in the grades of the students with learning disabilities in other subject areas due to increased instructional time in the general education classroom. Overall, I feel that all students benefited from the inclusive setting.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

I hope that this research is a gateway for myself and others to future research. This research leaves opened doors for research in many areas. The effects of the teacher's expectations on the students' performance is an area to consider for further research. In this study, it seems that the general education teacher had much higher student expectations (both academically as well as behaviorally) than did the special education teacher. For instance, the general education teacher expected every student to work quietly and efficiently throughout the school day. Therefore, the general education teacher's high expectations may have been one reason that (according to class work scores) the students with special needs performed better in the inclusive setting.

Another area for future research is the validity of the QRI-3 oral reading tests. It would be interesting to know how the reading levels of the questions for these passages correlate with standardized material from each grade level. Also, curiosity leads me to wonder why so many of the questions for the passages are not actually comprehension questions (leading the administrator to believe that the student understood the passage), but are instead recall questions. It seems that this test measures the ability to recall specific details, not the ability to comprehend what one has read. In some cases, it is possible to recall specific details without having understood the passage.

It would be interesting to see if the results of this study are reproducible, especially on a larger scale. While an inclusive setting seems a better environment for these five students with reading disabilities, I cannot conclude that the same is true for all. Many variables play a part in making inclusion a success. These variables include the willingness of the teachers involved to individualize instruction in order to meet the needs of exceptional students in the regular classroom. This is often an overwhelming and very time consuming task for teachers (especially teachers with no training in this area).

In addition to simply reproducing this study on a larger scale, reversing the sequence of the settings may cause a change in the results. These five students with learning disabilities were accustomed to leaving the regular classroom every day to go to the resource room at a certain time. However, during the last six weeks of the study, they no longer left class for the resource room. I found, during this time, that these students were constantly watching the clock, since they were not familiar with sitting in one room for so long. I feel that this increased attention to the clock (instead of to the teacher) is part of the reason that these students did not show an increase in grades in other subject areas due to increased instructional time in the regular classroom. Perhaps if the students did not find it customary to go to the resource room at a certain time of day, then the results may have turned out differently.

One final area for future investigation is whether the ability to choose their own reading books at school has made these children more avid readers at home. A follow-up study in this area would be interesting. As we all know, research is never over.

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